

## Myanmar Traditional View on Civil Society

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### I. Introduction

In pre-colonial period, no trace of civil society in our modern sense was ever witnessed in Myanmar history. All people were subjects of a ruling monarch. They all referred to themselves as *kyun-taw* or *Kyun-taw-ma*—meaning his majesty’s slave (male or female), which simply means ‘I’ in English if they were servicemen or servicewomen. If otherwise, *kyun-noak*—meaning his majesty’s inferior slave or non-servicemen is commonly used to refer to oneself as one’s personal pronoun for “I”. Except regimental-like social status groups organized by some kings for administrative and military purposes, there had been no civil society up to the fall of Kon-baung Dynasty.

It will be wise to think of the monastic order as a part of civil society. Indeed, it is a supra mundane society. Buddhist monks lived in groups in their respective monastery complexes, either teaching or learning Buddhist scriptures or practicing meditation. In central and lower Myanmar, almost all villages had, at least, one monastery where young monks, novices and boys could learn an elementary education of reading, writing and arithmetic. According to monastic discipline

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(laws) monks are nothing to do for mundane affairs, but they sometimes helped solve the grievances of the people taking place due to maladministration.

Monks composed epistles addressing to the king, expressing in them tax-burdens imposed on the people and asking for their relief. . Such evidences are not rare in Myanmar history. Monks used to take part of the duties of civil societies. They often took a mediating role in times of social chaotic conditions between the ruler and the ruled. And some monks led the people for their freedom. Anthropologists used to brand it as millenarian movement.

Myanmar kings never allowed people to organize a society for any purpose. People, on the other hand, did not know their rights nor forming an organization. They were forbidden to speak of *minzaga* and *sozaga* —meaning political matters and administrative matters. Those talking about such political and administrative matters were severely punished. One can see such events in King Badon's edicts.

To be frank, civil societies appeared only in the colonial period. All of their movements are found based on Buddhist thoughts and Buddhist monks as their backbone. People organized societies for propagation and perpetuation of Buddha Sasana so that they could withstand the penetration of other missionaries.

## II. Myanmar

Myanmar society has developed, mainly based on Buddhist culture and tradition. Since the society has grown with the preaching of the Buddha, it becomes habitual by Buddhist tradition for Myanmar to help others especially those who are in need of help. Hence providing assistance to others is common in Myanmar society.

In Myanmar society there may be social problems or less. To solve

such problems social service activities come to exist. In countries all over the world social service activities can be divided into three categories- government, non-governmental and combination of the two. The said three categories are conducted in Myanmar society.

Nowadays Myanmar civil society, some local NGO's based on Buddhist Culture are emerged as providing the Myanmar people needs of help in education, health and social area. The civil society operating in the educational sector as the Buddhist Monastic School and conducting activities in social sector are Home for the aged and free funeral service society and hospital and Water Donation Project.

### III. Buddhist monastic education

In the history of Myanmar society Buddhism played the important role. Buddhism as follow by almost all Myanmar is the foundation and limelight for Myanmar. On that foundation arose Myanmar national culture and the Buddhist monasteries served as centers for propagating Buddhist culture and education.

The learning centers of Myanmar in the past were monasteries in various places in all over the country. Monks have been both the spiritual teachers of the people and responsible for the basic literacy of laypersons. The primary school children of Myanmar attend the Buddhist monasteries to acquire literacy as well as knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. Thus, the schools provide not only curriculum education but also ethics and moral foundation for the children's. Therefore The monastic education tradition has been an integral part of Myanmar culture in order that gained patriotic spirit admired Buddhism and appreciated Buddha Sasana.

When Myanmar became a British Colony and from that time onward, Myanmar national culture based on Buddhism being gradually

belittled the majority of Myanmar who gradually losing touch with Buddhist culture. Therefore majority of young Myanmar did not get enough knowledge of Buddhist culture. Under such situation it is quite essential that the young school children learning at primary and middle school are to be taught Buddhist culture systematically with other formal subjects in monasteries where monastic education is installed with the view to produce good citizens of high morality. In this sense, many monasteries were existed as a center of education as well as religion in many rural regions of Myanmar.

Unfortunately in 1962 monastic education was abolished by Myanmar's socialist government. Generally the monastic schools assist in providing basic educational needs of the country especially for children from needy families and orphans - filling the significant gap within the education system. Monastic education returned in 1993 when the government began recognized monastic schools that followed the guidelines of the Ministry of Education (Zoellner 2007).

Monastic education centers have been the most important civil-society institutions bridging the accessibility gap in the state-run education system in government-controlled areas, while public schooling is not available. Monastic schools today especially target orphans or children from poor families, who can ill-afford to pursue formal education. Some well-funded monastic schools also provide students with free food and accommodation while many others are just normal day schools.

Monastic education system in Myanmar is a free education system. Myanmar Buddhist monasteries are always ready to provide education on free of charge basis to anyone who wants to learn. In addition, learners at the school are given food and shelter too. It is in fact the traditional practice since Buddhist culture started to exist in the society (Than Byin 1972: 100) On that cultural basis and with the aim to provide all children rich or poor with basic education at very nominal

cost and to mould them into those who understand Myanmar culture and traditional and observe and safeguard Buddhism and its teaching with high morality, monastic education school are nowadays opened across the country. 241 monastic schools in forty townships of Yangon division came into existence in 1994.

Currently, monastic education system and its schools are taking a very important role in Myanmar educational sphere. Some famous monastic schools are running the school both for Sasana and educational matters. The main objective of running the school is to provide education to poor children, straying children, orphans, young kids from hilly region in order to upgrade their future lives. It is quite appreciable to find that there were some fund-raising activities for the all-round welfare for the boarding students done by the school itself for making of altruistic functions. The common objectives of monastic education are to develop and propagate Buddha Sasana to teach Buddhist scripture and culture to the children (Myat Myat Moe 2011: 28).

#### IV. Home for Aged

Myanmar society has developed, mainly based on Buddhist culture and tradition. Since the society has grown with the noble preaching of the Buddha, it becomes habitual by Buddhist tradition for Myanmar to help others especially those who are in need of help. Hence providing assistance to others is common in Myanmar society. Apart from social or community based that serve for public health in Myanmar there has been a number of religious organizations serving for the same.

Buddhist monasteries, nuns homes, religious voluntary social organizations usually initiate to create homes for aged, orphanages, care centers for women to help the needy. Due to those initiatives, civil

societies, non - profit and nongovernmental organizations come into Myanmar. Some of the mostly known are home for Aged, and free Funeral Service Society in Mandalay and Yangon.

It is very interesting how Home for the aged was established by Buddhist nuns Daw Oo Zun, first founder of the Home in Myanmar who set up altogether five Homes for the Aged as like Christian Home since in 1933. With the aim to systematically establish an organization to help the aged draft was approved in 1951 and opened in Yangon and Mandalay and other towns.

The main objective of the Home for the aged is to keep the aged poor and helpless from every corner of the country at the Home to provide them care and protection to develop their physical and mental health and help them for their better journey of the cycle of rebirth. The Home always treat and protect them for their food, clothing, shelter, health , medical treatment, meditation, convenient living in their aging time. When an aged expires, the Home will arrange his or her funeral in accordance with necessary religious practice and rites. While medi-care is fully served to the aged, the Home administrative authorities arrange occasional celebrations of social or religious concerned (The Aged Journal 37: 186).

This Home sometimes encountering with dangers and hardships sometimes with honors and pleasures and other times with aspirations and results. Anyhow, it is undeniable that the Home for the Aged had served those who are really poor, helpless and aged for seventy three years for their convenient living in their ending period. On the other way how much develop civil society in Myanmar.

## V. The Free Funeral Service Society

In Yangon, Myanmar, there appeared an association to very

differently help those who need much urgent help. A civil society organization based on Yangon, founded by film director Thukha and is headed by many prominent persons in the entertainment industry, including actor Kyaw Thu, provides free funeral services for the poor in Yangon Region on 1 January 2001. The whole process of the function was totally voluntary. The society is ready to help any one or any family regardless of race, religion or social status in respect of funeral matters.

FFSS is civil society and stands on donation of well-wishers, extending its help to the rich as well as the poor. When it helps the rich, they may spare donation to the society and that donation can be used to help the poor. Thus the society has been serving the people from all walks of life whenever they are in urgent need for funeral matters since its establishment (Than Myint Aung 2006: 40)

FFSS also help the families of those deceased whose cause of death is related to criminal concern such as drown, fire, suicide, murder, accident etc. Apart from lay persons' funeral matters those of Buddhist monks are carried out. The Free Funeral Service Society has helped fund more than 100,000 funerals since it first started. At its beginning, FFSS could service for round about twenty funerals per day.

Besides, FFSS members came to sense that they should assist the poor for their health too. The main objectives of the society are to console the grieve-stricken family and to provide medicines to the poor who are severely suffering from one illness or another. They at their annual general meeting, decided to form the Medical Aid Committee. The committee with the well wisher's donation fund, gave aid to the poor patients who needed emergency operations thus creating sometimes double merited deeds by taking responsibilities for the cost of operation for poor expectant mothers so as to save "two lives at one time" ([www.wikimedia-freefuneralservicesocietyyangon.com](http://www.wikimedia-freefuneralservicesocietyyangon.com)). It is expressed striving to fulfill the need asked for funeral purposes by the

bereaved families or that requested by the poverty-ridden emergency patients for their medical charges.

In 2006, The Free Funeral Service Society opened a free health care clinic called Thukha. In 2009, its free clinic was ordered by a local court to be closed, after being forcibly relocated from Thingangyun Township to North Dagon Township in Yangon's outlying suburbs. In 2011, it opened another clinic in Bago Region's Pyay Township.

## VI. The Sitagu Association

Another Civil Society organization in Myanmar is Sitagu Association. It is strange to other civil organization because the founder is famous monk in Myanmar. The Sitagu Association was founded by the Venerable Sayadaw, Dr. Ashin Nyanissara, in 1980. The Sitagu Association is based at Sitagu Monastery in the Sagaing Hills, Sagaing, Myanmar. Situated on the banks of the Ayeyarwady River, some fifteen miles south of Mandalay, the Sagaing Hills have for many centuries been an important centre of Theravada Buddhism and of Myanmar Buddhist culture and civilization (Ashin Nanissara 2012). The Sitagu Association was established with three main aims or objectives in mind:

1. To strive for personal welfare through self-development and the cultivation of knowledge (*attattha cariya*),
2. To strive for the welfare of kin, friends and associates (*natatthacariya*) and
3. To strive for the welfare of all people without regard to caste, race, nationality or creed (*lokattha-cariya*).

With this sense The Sitagu Association has undertaken four welfare projects since 1980: the Sitagu Water Donation Project, Sitagu



Ayudana Hospital, Sitagu International Buddhist Academy and Sitagu Buddhavihara. The first three projects are located in the Sagaing Hills, while the fourth has been established in Austin, Texas, in the United States. All four projects are supported entirely by funds raised through private donation.

## VII. The Sitagu Water Donation Project

Sagaing is located in the dry zone of Myanmar, and for centuries, residents have had to rely on collected rain water to satisfy their daily needs. The Sitagu Water Donation Project was begun in 1982 to alleviate water shortages experienced by the monasteries and nunneries in the Sagaing Hills.

Over the past seventeen years, ten water reservoirs have been built which are supplied with water from the Ayeyarwady River . The water supply system covers an area of eight square miles, and supplies over 500,000 gallons of water per-day to more than 8000 monks, novices and nuns living in some 870 monasteries and nunneries. The Water Donation Project has yet to reach approximately fifty monasteries and nunneries in the area, but construction is nearly complete on an eleventh water reservoir and a new water-pump station. (**wikimedia. Sitagusayadaw**)

## VIII. Sitagu Ayudana Hospital

Construction began on the Sitagu Ayudana Hospital in 1985, and the hospital opened in 1989. The hospital now has one hundred beds, including those in the VIP, eye patient, and infectious disease wards. The out-patient department (O.P.D) and in-patient wards are housed in

seven buildings. Besides these, the hospital boasts a modern laboratory, an X-ray hall, a general operation theatre, an eye operation theatre, an indigenous medicine clinic, a training centre, a museum, a library, a computer office, an administrative office, guest hostels which include a VIP section, staff quarters, and a Buddha-shrine hall. ([www.wikimedia.Sitagusayadaw.org](http://www.wikimedia.Sitagusayadaw.org)).

On average, the hospital treats sixty in-patients and two hundred and fifty out-patients per-day, and since its inception has provided health care to over 100,000 individuals. Over the last nine years, the hospital staff has grown to more than seventy persons, including doctors, nurses and general personnel. Medical specialists from Mandalay also kindly donate their services on a weekly basis in the areas of general medicine, surgery, urology, dentistry, orthopedics, and in the treatment of diabetes and heart disease.

The eye treatment department in particular is equipped with technically advanced instruments for both the surgical extraction of cataracts, and for their removal without surgery through use of laser equipment. In addition, for the past four years the hospital has organized a special medical program in the month of December during which time eye specialists from England and the United States are invited to perform cataract operations in which hundreds of patients are given intra-ocular-lenses. The special program has been expanded this year to include two sessions, the first being held in October and the second in December. It is planned that this very successful medical program will be continued on a yearly basis. with the ability of Sayadaw Dr Ashin Nyanissara and providing of internal and external donors all these activities have well implemented and succeeded.

## IX. Conclusion

In studying the civil societies, the method of approach is purely historical point of view. How and when each of the civil societies originated, what their objectives were and how they have implemented them, how they have developed, what activities they have made in participating their respective sectors and what achievements they could make.

Social affairs in Myanmar are many and varied. Fulfillment of the social need of the Myanmar is to be performed with both long and short term plans by the civil society. While the government organizations are performing, a certain number of civil societies organized and led by the dutiful, good-hearted and able citizens has helped the civil society in implementing the plans or schemes set by the States. Some of them served locally while others did nation wide.

Since post-independence period, a rich civil society continued to develop in the cities and some towns, though not in the countryside in Myanmar because with the good experience in Colonial period. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, much of rural Myanmar was wracked by civil war, hindering the development of civil society. Civil society in Myanmar was quite controlled under military regime the sorts of steps but an expanded civil society is an increase in citizens. In striving to present the historical process of the civil society organization the following noticeable facts are found.

Some of the civil society organization have passed half a century and so been rich with both sweet or bitter experiences. The existence of such civil society organization shows the goodwill, persistence, courage, capability, and effort of their founders and successor who are Myanmar's and whose soul deserve high honor. Though those are younger, they too could due to their leadership's perseverance's, foresight, powerful altruisms, modernization, high qualification and

experience make remarkable achievements having strenuously participated in the respective sector.

All the organizations either old or middle or young, being civil society organization, they had to carry out their activities only within the limits as framed by the State's general policies. Despite the fact, civil society organization able to reach their goals in assisting public society in implementing the latter's projects or schemes in the respective fields. The basic principle of each and every organization being totally voluntary whether they are supported by international or internal donors whether the support are much or less are to be praised for their strenuous effort and considerable successes in implementing their objectives for the betterment and development of Myanmar people in the social sector.

As a conclusion for Myanmar to develop for civil society must be increased and the capacity of people to develop a strong civil society enhanced. At the same time, it is essential that independent organisations that do exist or new ones that emerge be based on principles of tolerance and democratic practice.

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<Abstract>

## **Myanmar Traditional View on Civil Society**

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A widely shared view identifies civil society with the set of nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. This tradition reflects a long history of social theory viewed in institutional terms. Myanmar society has developed, mainly based on Buddhist culture and tradition. Buddhist practice necessitates public validation within an economy of merit in which moral action earns future rewards. Myanmar private voluntary associations have, since ancient times, played a vital role in achieving social purposes. Buddhist monasteries were the main education institutions in Myanmar. Until today, monastic schools, or monastic education centers as they are often called, have been the most important civil-society institutions bridging the accessibility gap in the state-run education system in government-controlled areas. Apart from social or community based that serve for public health in Myanmar there has been a number of religious organizations serving for the same. Moreover there appeared an association to very differently help those who need much urgent help. Since military coup in 1962, however, successive regimes have sought to stamp out civil society and permit only state-controlled organizations. Civil society re-emerged during the nation-wide pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988. After 1988 civil societies are allowed as like a political party to form. Now a day some civil societies have worked to start small-scale projects addressing local problems, but they must stay clear of politics.

Key words : Buddhism, Civil society, monastic education, social need, Myanmar